

MEMORANDUM

To: Mr. Wang Yi, Director, Office of the CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission/Minister of Foreign Affairs, China

From: Abraham Wu, Policy Analyst, Chinese Embassy in Ankara, Turkey

Date: February 2, 2025

Subject: Bolstering Erdoğan's Regime: Advanced Surveillance and Targeted Economic Assistance for Long-Term Stability

Executive Summary

President Erdoğan's regime in Turkey faces a dual challenge: providing broad public goods such as security and economic stability while delivering targeted rewards to a narrow but essential group of backers. Although Erdoğan's constitutional reforms and high-profile initiatives have reinforced his power, recent rising economic instability and weakening institutional checks threaten his long-term survival.

This memo proposes that China supply advanced surveillance technology and targeted economic assistance to bolster Erdoğan's capacity to deliver both visible public goods and selective benefits. Enhanced surveillance will sustain national security and public confidence, while economic support will stabilize key sectors and reward regime insiders. By ensuring Erdoğan maintains a firm grip on power, China secures a stable partner whose centralized governance mirrors its own. This stability creates an environment favorable to long-term strategic investments, thereby expanding China's influence in a key region and challenging the appeal of the U.S.-led global order.

1. Context

Turkey's political landscape has undergone significant transformations under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Initially rising to power on promises of democratic reforms and economic growth, Erdoğan has since instituted a major shift toward a more centralized, executive-centric presidency. His government then expanded authority through the 2017 constitutional reforms which further consolidated presidential power (Ekim and Kirişci 2017; Kingsley 2017). Accompanying these changes are constraints on media freedoms, reshuffling of the judiciary, and laws that favor the largest ruling party at the expense of proportional representation (Cagaptay 2023).

Erdoğan's popularity once stemmed from his ability to deliver visible public goods: economic stability and infrastructure improvements. However, spiraling inflation, a weakening currency, and the government's heavily criticized earthquake response have undermined this economic and social track record (Cagaptay 2023; Kingsley 2017). At the same time, media consolidation and selective repression have raised concerns about whether

the broader public—formally the selectorate—still holds meaningful influence over who remains in power. With a smaller coalition of elite supporters and a large disenfranchised or demobilized public, Erdoğan must continually manage perceptions that his administration can deliver on national pride projects and selective benefits while also clamping down on dissent and splinter opposition leaders (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

2. Problem Diagnosis: Balancing Narrow Coalition Control vs. Broader Public Goods

In essence, Erdoğan's leadership hinges on preserving loyalty from a relatively small winning coalition (W) composed of top AKP (Justice and Development Party) figures, allied parties (e.g., MHP), loyal media conglomerates, and strategic business interests (Ekim and Kirişci 2017; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Meanwhile, the selectorate (S)—nominally millions of voters—does not fully exercise effective electoral choice if opposition figures face intimidation, the media lacks independence, and election rules favor the dominant party (Kingsley 2017).

Because W is narrow and S is large, incumbents rely more on targeted benefits (like lucrative contracts) to sustain loyalty (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Yet Erdoğan also periodically provides at least the appearance of broad public goods—such as big infrastructural ventures or military showpieces—to maintain national pride and sway marginal supporters (Lizzeri and Persico 2001). The crux of the challenge is whether such displays can offset frustrations stemming from high inflation, reduced civil liberties, and poor governmental responses to crises (Cagaptay 2023).

Erdoğan's long-run political survival is therefore vulnerable if the broader population loses faith in his ability to deliver meaningful public goods (e.g., economic security, disaster relief) and perceives that the state's resources are being used exclusively to enrich a narrow coalition. In this situation, weak incentives for broad public goods provision can intensify public discontent, and his broad support could collapse (Lizzeri and Persico 2001). Thus, Erdoğan must balance rewarding his core coalition while ensuring widespread support, especially if opposition alliances unite around a challenger focused on genuine public benefits.

3. China Needs to Provide Technological Support and Economic Assistance to Strengthen President Erdoğan's Leadership

Why China Needs to Act

Strengthening Erdoğan's rule aligns with China's global strategy. Supporting a regional power like Turkey, with its strong leadership governance style, highlights Beijing's commitment to fostering socio-economic development in nations often labeled "authoritarian" by the West (Mattingly 2024; Xi 2022). Erdoğan's stability would secure a favorable environment for Chinese investments and technology partnerships, bolstering China's influence in this strategic region.

Proposed Solution

(a) Provide Advanced Physical and Media Surveillance Technology

Providing AI-based border and urban-monitoring systems (like safe-city platforms) can help Turkish authorities track potential internal threats and manage dissent more accurately—minimizing overreach or backlash from mass arrests. This approach sustains the “security dividend” Erdoğan needs to reassure the larger population (Lizzeri and Persico 2001).

Also, China should facilitate advanced data analytics and digital content platforms that empower Turkish state media in shaping favorable narratives. Together with censorship firewalls, these tools reduce external information influences, enabling Erdoğan’s administration to dominate domestic media space without alienating borderline supporters (Kingsley 2017).

(b) Expand Financial and Economic Assistance

China can provide targeted loans and investments for major infrastructure projects—such as digital connectivity, transport, and defense manufacturing (Cagaptay 2023)—to signal visible public goods while reinforcing the loyalty of elite business partners. Also, Low-interest loans or currency-swap lines can help Erdoğan stabilize the lira amid inflation while enhancing his ability to provide benefits to key bureaucrats, security elites, and allied business groups (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

Why It Can Work

China’s advanced surveillance technology has proven effective in reinforcing security regimes abroad (Jili 2022). Erdoğan’s government, under economic pressure and aiming to boost domestic security, stands to gain from these tools by enhancing public safety and providing targeted benefits to key elites. Recent bilateral meetings reveal a shared interest in deeper security and economic cooperation between Turkey and China, opening the door for Beijing’s technology-based assistance (Akin 2024). By strengthening policing capabilities and offering financial support, China can help Erdoğan deliver both broad public goods—such as stability—and selective rewards to his inner circle, thereby reinforcing his leadership.

4. Limitations and Mitigation of the Solution

Potential Limitations

The proposed solution may face two primary challenges. First, the Western powers or regional actors might criticize China’s involvement, claiming it props up an “authoritarian system (Kingsley 2017).” Second, enhanced surveillance could trigger privacy concerns or civil-rights pushback, especially if media portrayals of digital policing raise public tensions.

Mitigation Measures

To address these risks, it is essential to collaborate with Turkish authorities to craft transparent usage guidelines for surveillance, defusing local backlash and providing plausible deniability against foreign criticism. Additionally, China should frame loans and infrastructure deals as fostering Turkey's sustainable growth—thereby emphasizing “win-win” cooperation. Such clarity reassures elites and segments of the public that China is not merely underwriting short-term political payoffs.

5. Two Alternative Approaches

Extending Diplomatic and Moral Support

China could extend moral endorsements and political backing without major material commitment. Although such measures can enhance China's global presence and send a positive signal, it fails to address Turkey's urgent need for external financing and advanced surveillance solutions—neither fully stabilizing the economy nor rewarding Erdoğan's backers, and thus are insufficient for sustaining the regime (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003).

Choosing Not to Help

Opting out would spare China immediate economic or reputational costs, yet it forfeits a golden opportunity. As Turkey searches for alternatives to Western financing and technology, inaction means missing out on strategic inroads that cement China's status as a key investor and development partner.

6. The Proposed Is Still the Best Option

Providing Erdoğan with integrated surveillance technology and tailored economic support strengthens his ability to deliver both public security and targeted benefits. Generic diplomatic endorsements or inaction fail to address Turkey's systemic challenges, including inflation and political pressures (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Cagaptay 2023). By offering advanced security capabilities alongside favorable financing, China reinforces Erdoğan's domestic coalition while deepening strategic ties with Turkey—advancing Beijing's broader foreign policy objectives.

Word Count: 1323

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